

Green Sense 12/08/13

Holiday Gifts

Millions of Americans head for the stores during "the season" between Thanksgiving and the Christmas holidays. Here are some gift ideas that are easier on the planet:

The 'lightest' touch of all is to reduce: reduce what you buy, reduce motorized traveling, reduce packaging and reduce purchases of materials that have to travel far to get to you. Consider buying 'local'. Gifts like baked goods from a local bakery, gifts purchased from locally-owned stores, or shares at a local CSA (community-supported agriculture) farm are all local-based options.

Or make edible gifts such as breads, cookies, or your favorite party mix. Package them in reusable tins, baskets, jars, or decorative bags or boxes. If you don't want to do the baking, put the measured ingredients for muffins or cookies in a mason-style jar dressed up with a bow and with baking instructions attached.

If you are going to go out to buy gifts, combining multiple shopping trips or sharing rides with friends, family, and neighbors saves fuel. By reducing multiple car trips, you can also reduce air pollution.

Make sure to bring your own reusable bags for shopping and/or combine purchases from different stores into one bag. Thousands of paper and plastic shopping bags end up as trash every year. Tell store clerks you don't need a bag for small or oversized purchases.

Avoid gifts that will be thrown away, use excessive packaging, or are made from environmentally sensitive materials, particularly tropical wood such as mahogany, teak, or rosewood. Try to buy items made with recycled content. Check product labels to determine whether it is made from recycled materials and to make sure what you are buying will also be recyclable at the end of its usefulness.

Look for items that exemplify the concept of reuse. For example: swings made from used tires, wooden toys made from scrap wood, craft kits that take advantage of used goods and discards, and drawing boards that can be erased and reused. Also consider the durability of a product before you buy it as a gift. Cheaper, less durable items often wear out quickly, creating excess waste.

There is no getting around electronics being on the top of holiday wish lists. When shopping for electronics, look for the ENERGYSTAR label to give your loved ones the gift of energy efficiency in addition to the latest and greatest in technology.

Choose energy-saving gifts such as florescent or LED light bulbs or low-flow showerheads and other 'saving' gifts that use wind-up power or use rechargeable batteries. About 40 percent of all battery sales occur during the holiday season. Buy rechargeable batteries to accompany your electronic gifts, and consider giving a battery charger as well.

Even better, consider giving solar battery chargers for those rechargeable batteries. You can get chargers for AAA to D, 9V, and 12V sizes and for ipod, laptop, camera, or cell phone. Rechargeable batteries reduce the amount of potentially harmful materials thrown away, and can save money in the long run.

For people with yards, a compost bin will help recycle yard waste and also provides a way to reduce food waste in the trash. The compost bin will give back - rich organic material for yard or garden.

You can give non-material gifts such as tickets to an event, dance lessons, spa visits, or membership to a museum or gym. There are many wonderful local charitable and environmental organizations that also offer events to members. For kids, consider giving an environmental excursion, such as whale-watching or camping trip.

The holiday season with many people buying Holiday Trees is the perfect time to make a donation to the Reading "Taking Root for the Future" shade-tree planting program. This tree-planting program offers an opportunity for you to help beautify Reading and recognize a person or event with the planting of a shade tree. Go to Town Hall or to the website www.readingma.gov and type "tree donation program" in the search box.

A column by members of Reading's Climate Committee, Gina Snyder, Stephanie Anderberg and Michele Benson